



## China Perspectives

2012/2 | 2012

Mao Today: A Political Icon for an Age of Prosperity

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### Editorial

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#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5842>

ISSN: 1996-4617

#### Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

#### Printed version

Date of publication: 4 June 2012

Number of pages: 2-3

ISSN: 2070-3449

#### Electronic reference

Sebastian Veg, « Editorial », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2012/2 | 2012, Online since 30 June 2012, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5842>

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# Editorial

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When Yan Lianke published his novel *The Joy of Living* (*Shou huo*) in 2004, in which a gang of disabled villagers sets out to make enough money to buy Lenin's embalmed corpse, many readers may have been reminded of the seemingly boundless symbolic benefits reaped daily from another embalmed corpse in present-day China: the one enshrined in the mausoleum on Tiananmen square. Although some may choose not to see it, Mao's portrait continues to adorn Tiananmen Gate, as well as banknotes of all denominations in the latest series, issued in 1999. Mao-style or Mao-language, a particular form of political rhetoric in which most of the current leadership was trained, continues to exert undeniable influence in the political and more largely in the social arena, especially in the now pervasive discourse of pre-1949 victimisation that has become China's national narrative.<sup>(1)</sup> In the same way, Mao has remained an inexhaustible topic in intellectual debate, in successive incarnations as de-maoisation, parody, commodification, nostalgia, instrumentalisation, and rehabilitation, phenomena in turn studied by China scholars around the world.

As the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approached, discussions focused on the purported "red revival" spurred by Bo Xilai's campaign of *chang hong da hei* or "Praise the Red and strike down the Black" in Chongqing, a combination of tough measures on crime, socially inclusive policies praised by some as harbingers of a new social model, and propaganda steeped in Mao-era references, such as the "red songs" for which Chongqing had become famous. The Chongqing experiment, launched by a politician educated during the Cultural Revolution (Bo was born in 1949), attracted widespread interest overseas and among Chinese intellectuals, a good number of whom flocked to Chongqing to take up honorary positions in various academic and semi-academic structures lavishly funded by Bo. NYU professor Zhang Xudong took up an appointment as dean of humanities at Chongqing University, declaring that he was trying to go back to the "well-rounded spirit of the 1980s."<sup>(2)</sup> *Modern China* published a special issue devoted to "Chongqing: China's new experiment" in 2011. In it, Philip Huang argued that Chongqing's provision of infrastructure and social welfare by state-owned enterprises whose access to liquidity was guaranteed by the ownership of increasingly valuable land represented an unprecedented "third hand" and a new economic model.<sup>(3)</sup>

Bo's fall in March 2012 confirmed what many observers suspected: that he had mainly used references to the Mao era to garner political capital in pre-Congress manoeuvring. Nonetheless, the "Chongqing model," which is considered by some to have predated Bo's term as Party secretary of Chongqing (Mayor Huang Qifan was posted to Chongqing in 2002, five years before Bo), continued to receive attention as addressing a genuine need in Chinese society, possibly surviving its most vocal promoter. Others underline that Bo's policies in Chongqing were not substantially different from those defended by Hu and Wen in Beijing, despite marked differences in style. For all his undeniable strategic motivations, Bo's re-introduction of Mao into the political debate unleashed a wide scope of intra- and extra-Party discussions, ranging from the critique of China's unequal growth and

the role of the state in the economy to a re-evaluation of the Cultural Revolution and the role of ideology and media control today. Hence, as the Party prepared for the leadership transition of 2012, in which power is projected to pass to a generation educated during the Cultural Revolution (Xi Jinping, born in 1953, and Li Keqiang, born in 1955, were both sent down to the country as *zhiquing* or educated youths), it once again staged its divisions over personalities in ideological terms, as has long been its practice.

This special issue of *China Perspectives* attempts to situate developments in Chongqing and the Bo Xilai affair within the context of the struggle over the legacy of Party history, ideology, and legitimacy, and in particular over the reference to Mao in the contemporary political, social, and intellectual debates. Indeed, Mao might seem an unlikely choice to embody new policy options in what Chan Koon-chung has called China's present "age of prosperity" or *shengshi* 盛世.<sup>(4)</sup> The intensifying factional struggle between the Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin camps has demonstrated that the intra-Party succession procedures much touted five years ago are in fact far less efficient than surmised, and that the handover of power remains the regime's Achilles heel, as previously illustrated (at their own expense) by Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, and Zhao Ziyang. Indeed, the line-up of the incoming standing committee that seems most probable today, with a possible majority of members close to the retiring age of 68, portends another similarly violent power struggle in five years' time. Chinese intellectuals and large parts of the population are sidelined in these conflicts, and many commented on the Bo affair as a kind of drama they could only watch from the outside. At the same time, this ubiquitous conflict of interest groups (*liyi jituan*) in which the population has no role has served to reveal the dissatisfaction of many intellectuals with what Wang Hui terms the "de-politicisation" of the Hu Jintao era, in which policy choices are justified in technical rather than political terms. In this context, the reference to Mao – because it is a permissible "politicised" reference – serves to legitimise the reintroduction of politics into the technocratic debate, dominated by China's rise and prosperity. As Wang Hui's own writings illustrate, Mao seems to be the only available reference to "repoliticise" Chinese politics, and thus continues to structure the political forum.

Mao himself remains a controversial persona in the intellectual debate in China. While the 1981 "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the founding of the PRC" tried to strike a balance in preserving the pre-1949 Mao, as well as Mao at the core of the collective leadership in 1949–1956, while condemning partly or wholesale the Mao of later

1. On Maoist discourse, see the enlightening article by Yu Liu: "Maoist Discourse and Mobilization of Emotions in Revolutionary China," *Modern China*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, pp. 329–362.
2. Zhang Xudong, "Wo weishenme xuanze Chongqing" (Why I chose Chongqing), *Guancha*, 10 October 2011, <http://www.guancha.cn/html2/60317/2011/10/10/65876.shtml> (consulted on 21 May 2012).
3. See Philip C. C. Huang, "Chongqing: Equitable Development Driven by a 'Third Hand'?", *Modern China*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2011, pp. 569–622.
4. See Chan Koon-chung's 2010 novel *Shengshi*, now translated into English under the title *The Fat Years*. See also the special issue of the *China Heritage Quarterly* devoted to "China's Prosperous Age," *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 26, June 2011, <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/editorial.php?issue=026> (consulted on 25 May 2012).

years, the question of a more radical de-Maoisation is one that regularly surfaces in China. In the lead-up to the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Party in 2011, a rumour circulated on the Chinese Internet that the Politburo had passed a secret resolution in December 2010 demanding to remove Mao's name from all Party documents. This was subsequently disproven by Xi Jinping and Hu Jintao's marked mention of Mao in the anniversary speeches, but retired Party historian Xin Ziling, author of *The Fall of the Red Sun* (*Hong Taiyang de yunluo*), one of the probable sources of the rumour, continues to advance his ideas online and in interviews, together with economist Mao Yushi and other liberal activists. On the other end of the spectrum, the idea of rehabilitating Mao's concept of "New Democracy" as an expression of China's "third way" was put forward by Carl Schmitt-admirer Zhang Musheng and strongly endorsed by Liu Shaoqi's son Liu Yuan, a major-general in the PLA and rumoured to be an ally of Bo Xilai. "Red" websites such as *Utopia* or *Maoflag*, though temporarily shut down after the fall of Bo, are likely to come back on line eventually.

Meanwhile, as local archives of the pre-Cultural Revolution era begin to open, it is noteworthy that not only foreign academics or investigative journalists or writers (Yang Jisheng, Liao Yiwu) have begun to conduct archival research on the Mao era, but also academics employed by universities in the mainland, such as the late Nanjing University professor Gao Hua, who published a ground-breaking study of the CCP's time in Yan'an, *How the Red Sun rose* (*Hong taiyang shi zenyang shengqi de*) in 2000, or his colleagues at East China Normal University, Shen Zhihua and Yang Kuisong.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, retired Peking University professor Qian Liqun published in Taiwan a two-volume, 800-page monument entitled *The Mao Era and the Post-Mao Era* (*Mao Zedong shidai he hou Mao Zedong shidai*), in which he argues that "Mao culture" remains pervasive in today's China and has precluded the emergence of true critical thinking in the PRC. Qian explores some alternative foundations of such thinking, including a chapter devoted to the unjustly forgotten economist Gu Zhun.

Returning once more to Mao, while it may be timely, also runs the risk of repetition. Many of the current developments in the treatment of Mao date back to the 1990s and the aftermath of Tiananmen. Geremie Barmé's anthology *Shades of Mao* (1996) and his monograph *In the Red* (1999) were the first full-fledged discussions of the culturally commodified but politically ambiguous renewed Mao cult of the 1990s. The volume *Critical Perspectives on*

*Mao Zedong's Thought*, edited by Arif Dirlik, Paul Healy, and Nick Knight in 1997, contained equally thought-provoking questions about Mao's contemporary relevance. Two further recent edited volumes should be mentioned: *Mao's Invisible Hand*, edited by Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry, which, as its title suggests, examines the lasting impact of Mao in today's political structures and policies, and *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution*, edited by Ching Kwan Lee and Yang Guobin, which takes a more bottom-up approach in examining popular collective memories of the Revolution in general and, in several essays, of Mao in particular. The present collection takes a slightly different though complementary approach. Maoism or Mao-era references are not considered only as an implicit structure of the polity, an "invisible hand" that continues to influence the interactions of state and society; the hypothesis is rather that the many explicit references to Mao are relevant to understanding the political, social, and intellectual debates about the future of the People's Republic, in a context in which politics is dominated by interest groups without clear political agendas.

In the first contribution, Willy Lam retraces the most important aspects of the Chongqing Experiment and Bo Xilai's uses of Maoist references on the political scene, which may well continue beyond the fall of Bo. Arif Dirlik analyses how Mao is presented and discussed in official historiography, the goal of which remains to "save" Mao from the Cultural Revolution in order to cement his place as the Sinifier of Marxism and the founder of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Geremie Barmé analyses the "red legacies" in current intellectual and political debate, and their manifold mutations, political ambiguities, and international connections. Sebastian Veg examines the figure of Mao in two recent state-sponsored blockbusters, appraising the role of propaganda in Hu Jintao's new cultural policy, as well as Mao's place in the national narrative. Finally, in a more personal essay, historian Ding Dong starts out from his own experience of Maoism before re-examining it in the context of recent critiques of the Chairman, pleading for a more empirical approach to the emotionally charged issues surrounding his legacy. The possibility of carrying out more archival research, including within China, is certainly encouraging, and may point towards a goal that still seems far-off: a social consensus on Mao and the Chinese Revolution within the narrative of modern Chinese history.

5. See Yang and Shen's volumes in the – as yet incomplete – new History of the People's Republic of China published in Hong Kong (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi*, CUHK Press, 10 vol., 2008-).